A Philosophical Jester: Thoughts and Jokes in Stoppard's *Arcadia* and its Preliminaries

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Although the epoch of great narratives is said to be over, and encyclopaedic knowledge of the sciences and the humanities is impossible, playwright Tom Stoppard seems to represent a unique example of thorough intellectual knowledge in his works. Thoughts and theories are permanent and outstanding components of his plays. In 19th century critical realist fiction all sorts of information served as part of the social panorama and represented the dominance of the omnipotent narrator. In the 20th century the polyhistoric novel (Broch's term) fulfilled a similar function with its complicated structure, polyphonic narrative and polymath author. In Stoppard's plays the borrowed, referred and cited ideas have several simultaneous functions. Stoppard does not pretend to be the inventor of these thoughts even if he does not identify his sources. Theories function as demonstration of the relativity of the characters' experience. They countervail both emotions and thoughts. Theories are often parodied and indirectly criticised by being staged. Theoretical discourse appears as part of the literary discourse, and although the arguments do not lose their textual features, their function becomes different; namely, they take on the polyphonic openness of literature. Stoppard's thoughts and theories are intellectual games, comic parodies, and theatrical inventions at the same time. Borrowing plots, characters, structures, genres, and different theoretical views, Stoppard creates a special quality of dramatic art in which theory is a particular, essential component.

Stoppard has always included theoretical views, statements, and remarks in his plays. These theories come both from the sciences and the humanities. Probability, predictability, entropy, mathematical paradoxes, logical positivism, quantum theory, the uncertainty principle, the philosophy of Kant, Wittgenstein's language theory, Magritte's surrealism, Tzara's Dada, and psychological puzzles of identity are all parts of Stoppard's dramatic oeuvre. There is a broad variety of thoughts and theories in Stoppard's plays, which are always combined with intellectual and practical jokes. Approaching Stoppard's plays one can study the metamorphosis of theoretical views in stage situations, their influence on dramatic characterisation and techniques of composition; and the issue of what becomes of theories if dramatic characters utter them on stage to other fictitious creatures before a theatre audience.

Stoppard's plays keep the traditional means of dramatic form, i. e. characters, dialogues, directions. Although he is often regarded as an absurdist playwright, the composition and philosophy of his plays go beyond the theatre of the absurd. He creates ambivalent situations, he often uses dialogue as a form of contradiction, and a permanent feature of his plays is speculation and intellectual reflection. The Anglo-Irish tradition of wit turns in his works into pastiche, fabrication, and identified and unidentified citation. Stoppard's plays have a philosophical character

which includes the use of logical paradoxes, linguistic and intellectual games, and parody.

What all of his plays have in common is a delight in puns, elisions, and juxtapositions. In *Travesties* he flings together Lenin (and the theory of communism), James Joyce (and the idea of the impossibility of communication), Tristan Tzara (and the practice and idea of Dadaism) with the recycling of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. His *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* is structured around confusion between the vocabulary of music and mathematics. In *Hapgood* he conflates the paradoxical identity of a double agent with quantum mechanics. His clever and literate comedies, from *Arcadia* to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, refer not only to theories but often reflect or include popular dramatic forms as well.

One of the recent examples of the use of theories is Stoppard's 1993 *Arcadia*, in which he brings together two epochs, the early 19th century and the present. The contemporary characters, a garden historian, a professor of literature, and a biologist-computer scientist, try to detect what happened in a country house in Derbyshire in the first decades of the 19th century. Three scenes out of the seven take place in the past and three in the present, while the last scene brings together the characters from the two time periods, who are unable to discern each other. The play is too complex to be reduced to an example of post-modern theory. I shall, therefore, focus on certain theoretical topics explicitly presented and dramatised in the play.

Concerning the central scientific topic of the play, Stoppard's major source was James Gleick's *Chaos: Making a New Science* published in 1987. In *Arcadia* Stoppard explicates chaos theory through the arguments of Valentine who discovers that the theory was founded and developed by Thomasina Coverly two centuries earlier. In the scenes of the past "Thomasina is... thinking about the irreversibility of processes as well as the movement towards larger and larger disorder.... She realizes the discrepancy between the traditional geometrical forms and natural objects" (Vees-Gulani 414). Thus she touches upon all major aspects of chaos theory. In the scenes of the present Valentine explains Thomasina's theories to his colleagues, and consequently to the audience as well. The scenes of the past and those of the present reflect each other; they are comparable in topic and structure. Their relationship can be described as an application of chaos theory, for the scenes of the two epochs are "comparable to the self-similar structures of fractal images" (Vees-Gulani 416).

Arcadia uses not only chaos theory, but the theory of gardening, the conflict between classicism and romanticism, sex, literature and criticism etc. The most directly dramatised disciplines, besides chaos theory, are mathematics and physics. Pierre de Fermat's theorem/enigma, iterated algorithm, statistics (i.e. to determine the grouse population from hunting books), and the equation of the propagation of heat in a solid body are explicitly discussed in the play. Their function is to represent different views and theories of the universe, expressed by different characters. Valentine says,

> The unpredictable and the predetermined unfold together to make everything the way it is. It's how nature creates itself, on every scale, the snowflake and the snowstorm.... People were talking about the end of physics. Relativity and quantum looked as if they were going to clean out the whole problem between them. A theory of everything. But they

only explained the very big and the very small…. The future is disorder.
(47-48)

Chloe's view is that "The universe is deterministic all right, just like Newton said, I mean it's trying to be, but the only thing going wrong is people fancying people who aren't supposed to be in that part of the plan" (73). Thomasina expresses a similar view, saying, "The Chater would overthrow the Newtonian system in a weekend" (84). The failure of contemporary characters to identify and interpret past events (shown to the audience in separate scenes), demonstrates that ideas about the past and tradition can differ significantly. While Bernard thinks he has written about real facts in his essay on Byron's fatal duel, Valentine says, "It may all prove to be true," but Hannah replies, "It can't prove to be true, it can only not prove to be false yet" (74). In the historical scenes, when the world still seems to be governed by a divine order, Thomasina discovers the basic principles of chaos theory and entropy, and starts to question the principles of Newton.

Fermat's last theorem appears in the opening scene as a counterpoint to the topic of sexuality. The 22 year old tutor Septimus instructs the 13 year old Thomasina. "Carnal embrace is sexual congress, which is the insertion of the male genital organ into the female genital organ for purposes of procreation and pleasure. Fermat's last theorem, by contrast, asserts that when x, y and z are whole numbers each raised to power of n, the sum of the first two can never equal the third when n is greater than 2" (3). Thomasina says that Fermat's note appears in the margin of his edition of Diophanti's *Arithmetica*, that the margin is too narrow to prove his theorem, and that it is a mere joke. But when she writes in her textbook that the margin is too mean to prove her New Geometry of Irregular Forms, the theorem turns out to be true. When Valentine crunches Thomasina's equations through the computer a few million times beyond what she managed to do with her pencil, there is the proof on the computer screen. But according to Stoppard's fiction, Thomasina died in the fire of the house the night before her 17th birthday. She, who could have solved Fermat's theorem, died too early. Heinz Antor argues that

> Stoppard makes it clear throughout the play… that the movement from order to disorder, from classical patterns to complex chaos, from a well-structured static system to the dynamics of the progress toward ever-increasing entropy, from linearity and consistency to non-linearity and contingency is anything but a sign of lunacy in those who see in this development one towards a more accurate description of the world. The movement described here is an irresistible one in *Arcadia*. (Antor 338-39)

Simon Singh's book *Fermat's Enigma,* which topped the British best-seller lists for seven weeks in 1997, tells the mathematical history of the theorem. *Arcadia* opened at the Lyttelton on 13 April 1993, while Andrew Wiles delivered his lecture on the solution of Fermat's theorem in the Newton Institute in Cambridge (UK) on 23 June, that is, two months later. This is a mere coincidence, but it shows that the theories which occur in Stoppard's plays are not dead, dusty, or artificial; on the contrary, like "unsolved mysteries," they stimulate theorising within a particular discipline. At the same time these intellectual issues appear within a comic frame-

work counterpointed by certain theatrical and/or linguistic issues, creating a humorous effect.

All the issues from chaos theory and Fermat's enigma to gardening and Lord Byron appear both in the scenes of the past and those of the present, creating a special self-reflexive relationship between the two time periods and the two groups (past and present) of characters. "The play... shows that relying only on what appears to be facts is impossible and can be unreliable" (Vees-Gulani 421), and by this Stoppard puts all his characters and motives into a context of uncertainty, which works as a comic effect, demonstrating, as Michel de Certeau declares, that "the past is the fiction of the present" (qtd. in Vees-Gulani 421), and it is not something factual or "objective."

In an earlier, shorter play of the author, a different example of the relationship between thoughts and jokes appears. In the introduction to *Dogg's Hamlet*, Stoppard declares that the play "derives from a section of Wittgenstein's philosophical investigations" (*Plays* 141). Then he offers Wittgenstein's example of two men working together at a construction through language and action. In the example the two men are using two different languages, which is not apparent to either party. Stoppard concludes, "The appeal to me consisted in the possibility of writing a play which had to teach the audience the language the play was written in" (*Plays* 142). The first part of the one act play is a theatrical, situational application of Wittgenstein's language game theory, and the second is a 15-minute summary of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the first part Stoppard creates a parody of Wittgenstein's theory by indicating the humorous implications of Wittgenstein's thought, showing how it would work if different groups were to use the same vocabulary to mean completely different things. Comedy arises when English-speaking characters try to collaborate with Dogg-speaking partners using the same words with different meanings. Thus the play can be seen as an application and parody of a particular theoretical idea, combining thoughts and jokes in the content and composition of the play.

In *Jumpers,* the second major Stoppard play, the content of the play revolves around moral philosophy in the character of Archibald Jumper, who practices "philosophical jumperism," and the traditionalist George Moore who prepares throughout the play to engage in a public debate with logical positivist Duncan McFee for the chair of logic at their university. In theatrical terms, the play shows George dictating his lecture to his secretary, while in the next room his wife Dotty, who had been a musical-comedy actress of some renown, is trying to hide the corpse of the gymnast killed during the party.

The play, based on simultaneous scenes and actions, is partially dominated by George's philosophical arguments. Its motivation is that he is rehearsing for his lecture on good and evil. George says,

The study of moral philosophy is an attempt to determine what we mean when we say that something is good and that something else is bad. Not all value judgements, however, are the proper study of the moral philosopher. Language is an infinite instrument crudely applied to an infinity of ideas, and one consequence of the failure to take account of this is that modern philosophy has made itself ridiculous by analysing such statements as, "This is a good bacon sandwich," or, "Bedser had a good wicket" (*Jumpers* 63).

Elsewhere, Stoppard refers to the real life model of his protagonist, whose name is (almost) identical with the character's name, and creates an ironic situation by combining the fictitious and the real figures. George says about the real philosopher: "It is ironic that the school which denies the claims of the intuition to know good when it sees it, is itself the product of the pioneer work set out in his *Principia Ethica* by the late G. E. Moore, an intuitionist philosopher whom I respected from afar but who, for reasons which will be found adequate be logical spirits, was never in when I called" (67).

The final scene and at once coda of the play is George's departmental lecture, which is a surreal, nightmarish mixture of several philosophical thoughts and arguments, a total confusion that makes him collapse. Previously, he has referred to Descartes, Copernicus, St. Thomas Aquinas, Bertrand Russell, Wittgenstein, and others. He does not synthesise the theories of these thinkers, but uses them as multiple perspectives, similarly to Einstein's abandonment of fixed viewpoints. These pluralist contexts do not function as negations or confusions but are employed "in order to be precise over a greater range of events," and ambiguities "are just places where contexts join" (Clive James, qtd. in Delaney 56).

Jumpers, like *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, is not only about theory. Stoppard lightens the seriousness of philosophy with popular theatrical forms, with the *whodunit* formula (Dotty's murder mystery) and the *comic debate* (originating from Aristophanes, and developed into a play of ideas by G. B. Shaw). George's "logocentric resistance to the Jumpers' relativism is stylistically antithetical to Dotty's gestural and musical resistance to the death of romance. But they are alike in resisting the Jumpers' mock-positivist reading of human life as nothing more than meaningless transformations of nucleic acids" (Kelly 99). Impersonated theories and philosophers as embodiments of ideas significantly differ from intellectual speculation. In *Jumpers* theory serves as a means of characterisation and becomes a vehicle to demonstrate the relationship between characters. No matter how theoretical the source may be, the same sentences become sensuous and emotional in the context of the play. Comic effects and ridiculousness arise not only from the juxtaposition of theory and theatrical action, but from the method of deriving direct conclusions from theoretical premises to common sense experiences. The following passage illustrates the nature and logic of causality.

> Why does my sock exist? Because a sock-maker made it, in one sense; because, in another, at some point previously, the conception of a sock arrived in the human brain; to keep my foot warm in a third, to make a profit in a fourth. There is reason and there is cause and there is the question, who made the sock-maker's maker? etcetera, very well, next! see, see I move my foot which moves my sock. (*Walks*.) I and my foot and my sock all move around the room, which moves around the sun, which also moves, as Aristotle said, though not round the earth, he was wrong about that. (28)

In his interview with *Theater Quarterly* in 1974, entitled "Ambushes for the Audience: Towards a High Comedy of Ideas," Tom Stoppard said that, "*Jumpers* is a serious play dealt with in the farcical terms which in *Hound* actually *constitute* the play" (qtd. in Delaney 11). *The Real Inspector Hound*, following *Rosencrantz and*

Guildenstern Are Dead in 1968, attempts "to bring off a sort of comic coup in pure mechanistic terms" (Delaney 8) by providing a parody of the thriller genre. Its opening scene introduces a pair of theatre critics, Moon and Birdboot, already seated in the auditorium waiting for "the play" to begin. The spectators "gradually learn each critic's private obsession—Moon's jealousy of the first-string critic Higgs, and Birdboot's lust for the actress playing Felicity—through which Stoppard will motivate their involvement in the thriller's plot" (Kelly 83). Theory in this double-play occurs in the form of aesthetic arguments by the critics. Parody and comic effect originates from the contradiction of the critics' ideas and the form of Stoppard's play, which denies the Aristotelian dramaturgy explained by Birdboot in this way: "It is at this point that the play for me comes alive. The groundwork has been well and truly laid, and the author has taken the trouble to learn from the masters of the genre. He has created a real situation, and few will doubt his ability to resolve it with a startling denouement. Certainly, that is what it so far lacks, but it has a beginning, a middle and I have no doubt it will prove to have an end" (*Plays* 31). While the first sentences represent commonplaces of theatrical reviews, the last ones echo the description of a proper plot in Aristotle's *Poetics*, where the philosopher explains what kind of plot the genre of tragedy must have. Stoppard's farce is anything but an example of defined generic norms.

Although Stoppard readily avers that in most of his plays (*Jumpers*, *Travesties*, *Hapgood*, *Arcadia*) he consciously sets out to deal with certain philosophical issues, he steadfastly rejects the notion that *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* had such an inspiration or intention. He declares, "I would absolutely deny that an intellectual or philosophical motive was in my mind when I wrote it" (qtd. in Delaney 15). "When I was writing *Rosencrantz* I was in no sense engaged in any sort of esoteric work. It was like music-hall, if anything, a slightly literate music-hall, perhaps" (qtd. in Delaney 15).

In spite of the author's declaration, it is obvious from the opening scene that the dramatic deconstruction of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the changing of the point of view from the Prince to the two courtiers signify the turning of the classical dramatic fate, the expectation of predictability, into the improbable and into mathematical unpredictability. Later, the Player representing written fate marks out the courtiers' place in the power game of the world by remarking, "uncertainty is the normal state. You're nobody special" (*Rosencrantz* 731). Although theory in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* is mostly driven from mathematics, in theatrical terms the drama is about "role playing as reality and about the problem of nature of life, which denies man absoluteness or fixity" (Rusinko 72). "A realm in which a coin can come up heads 92 times in a row must have some significance beyond the materialistic," writes Paul Delaney (34-35).

If we approach *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* from a philological perspective, we can link the coin-tossing to the definition of probability given by logical positivist Richard von Mises, who writes in his *Probability Statistics and Truth* that it is "the limiting value of the... frequency of a given attribute... within a given collective" (qtd. in Kelly 74). Even while illustrating a mathematical definition of probability, Stoppard takes care to deform his source, conflating Mises's definition with the popular notion of probability expressed by the idea that "monkeys could produce Shakespeare if left alone with a typewriter for a sufficient length of time" (Kelly 164).

Of the two courtiers, the one who thinks, Guil, says, "One, probability is a factor which operates within natural forces. Two, probability is not operating as a factor. Three, we are now within un-, sub- or supernatural forces. Discuss" (683). This formulation significantly differs from Mises's mathematical argument, as Stoppard's is part of a dramatic dialogue, while the second is a scholar's monologue. Guil's words are received as a partially unsuccessful dialogue with the dumber member of the pair, while the probability arguments are taken as serious, academic statements. The same words serve opposite functions within their contexts.

"Mathematicians are quick to point out that they are familiar with many series which have no first term—such as the series of proper fractions between nought and one. What, they ask is the first, that is the smallest, of these fractions? A billionth? A trillionth? Obviously not: Cantor's proof that there is no greatest number ensures that there is no smallest fraction. There is no beginning" (*Jumpers* 27). George Moore, professor of moral philosophy speaks these lines when preparing for a departmental lecture, in *Jumpers*. While in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* supporting characters and their limited perspectives are at the centre of the composition, in *Jumpers* the protagonist is a philosophy professor. He uses the above quoted words in an argument about the proof of the existence of God.

This difference between the two examples is part of the variety of Stoppard's dramaturgy. But in spite of moving from supporting characters to protagonists, from literary subject matter to documentaries, from historical times to the present, one of the basic features of Stoppard's oeuvre is the constant mixture of thoughts and jokes, theoretical issues and humorous gags. The distance between these fields, the bizarre relationship set up between scientific issues and everyday topics, between the abstract and the concrete constitute the unique features of Stoppard's style. When Stoppard borrows and mixes divergent plots, characters, structures, genres, theories, and thoughts, he demonstrates not only the inter-textual feature of literature, but at the same time creates a new, special quality. Philosophy is a necessary component of his plays because it can serve as a contrast to the individual experience of the dramatic characters. At the same time, theoretical issues seem relative and accidental in contrast with personal feelings and emotions. Therefore the humorous and funny "jester" has a necessary and organic connection with the theoretical aspect, the philosophical feature of Stoppard's plays. The separate sources, raging from mathematics to history, from philosophy to psychology, do not appear as unconnected parts. Although literary analysis puts the stress on separating these sources, in the plays the different thoughts and theories stand in a special unity. "Stoppard succeeds in unifying the play with an all-inclusive structure" (Vees-Gulani 411). One of the most significant means of this unification is a humorous, ironic style, which turns the seriousness of the borrowed theoretical issues into theatrical games, jokes, and parodies. This is why one can call the author of these plays a philosophical jester, where both phrases have an equal significance.

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